

VZCZCXRO8435
RR RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHYE #1413/01 3450617
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 110617Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6718
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001413

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: ARMENIA'S PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE SLATE NOW SET

YEREVAN 00001413 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) December 6 was the nomination deadline for Armenian presidential candidates. Nine persons have been nominated to participate in the February 19, 2008 election. In addition to Prime Minister Serzh Sargsian and ex-president Levon Ter-Petrossian, the widely acknowledged front-runners, there are several candidates whose nominations have raised eyebrows. Below is a full list, in roughly descending order of seriousness/relevance:

THE FRONT-RUNNERS

¶2. (SBU) Currently expected to be the last two standing for the run-off election round: PM Serzh Sargsian and ex-President Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP).

-- Serzh Sargsian: nominated by the ruling Republican party. As Prime Minister and acknowledged front-runner in the race, Sargsian also enjoys the support of the Republican Party's ruling coalition partner, Prosperous Armenia, as well as a number of marginal parties.

-- Levon Ter-Petrossian: self-nominated. Armenia's first president following independence in 1991, Ter-Petrosyan enjoys the support of the Armenian National Movement, the strident opposition Republic Party, the People's Party of Armenia and a number of small opposition parties and other supporters. LTP seems the strongest opposition candidate, but ranks far behind Sargsian in opinion polls.

THE DEAL-MAKERS

¶3. (SBU) The following candidates almost certainly will not win the presidency, but each commands sufficient following to be a player in political deal-making. Probably at least one, and more likely at least two, of these candidates would have to stay in the race through February 19, in order to force a run-off election, which the PM would probably prefer to avoid. (NOTE: The third figure we might otherwise place in this category, former AmCit Raffi Hovhanissian, is ineligible to run, lacking ten years of Armenian citizenship. His role in the upcoming race remains unclear. END NOTE)

-- Artur Baghdassarian: the former Speaker of the National Assembly (NA) was nominated by his Rule of Law party, the senior (by one seat) opposition party inside the NA. A key question is whether Baghdassarian would realize his best possible deal before or after the first-round election.

-- Vahan Hovhannisian: the senior Armenian Revolutionary Federation

("Dashnaksutyun") official in government, Hovhannisian is one of two deputy speakers of the NA. The ARF is probably good for about eight to fifteen percent of the vote, as usual.

YESTERDAY'S NEWS

¶4. (SBU) The following two are well-known political figures, whose best political days seem to be behind them.

-- Artashes Geghamian: the former (Soviet era) Yerevan mayor was nominated by his National Unity Party (also sometimes translated as National Accord). Geghamian's party was ignominiously thrashed during the May 2007 parliament election, demonstrating that his traditional popularity with pensioners has eroded considerably. Geghamian's genuine political independence and opposition credibility have been widely questioned.

-- Vazgen Manukian: nominated by his National Democratic Union party, Manukian's service under LTP, first as prime minister and later defense minister (for at least five minutes each), as well as his experience having the 1996 presidential election stolen from him by LTP, left him with an inflated sense of his rightful place in the Armenian political firmament. Armenian voters have long since tired of him. Some analysts had hypothesized he could be significant if he were to support LTP, as this would signify a kind of absolution for LTP's past sins. Manukian seems both disinterested in forgiving LTP, and doggedly determined to run.

-- Tigran Karapetyan: nominated by the party he leads, the Democratic party. He owns the generally pro-governmental ALM TV, the existence of which may be about the only reason the idiosyncratic politician is a household name. He is quirkily famous for inviting village-dwellers to sing on his TV network, which has garnered him a certain following among the rural poor.

WHO ARE YOU, AGAIN?

YEREVAN 00001413 002.2 OF 002

¶5. (SBU) The truly obscure:

-- Aram Harutyunyan: nominated by his obscure National Accord Party (not to be confused with Geghamian's similarly-named party), which appears only during presidential elections. In 2003, he collected a whopping 1,272 votes.

-- Arman Melikyan: self-nominated. He served as a former adviser to the Nagorno-Karabakh "President" Bako Sahakyan, and once as "Foreign Minister" of Nagorno-Karabakh. Perhaps the greatest surprise of the season (besides the re-emergence of ex-President Levon Ter-Petrosyan), Melikyan has never before participated in Armenian politics.

¶6. (SBU) Armenia's ex-boxing champion Israel Hakobkokhyan, whose farcical public appeal to President Kocharian (the "King of All Armenians") for financial support had attracted wry media attention, dropped out of the race, citing his inability to raise the eight million AMD (approximately USD 25,000) registration fee required of presidential candidates. Armenian oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, head of the Prosperous Armenia party and confidant of President Kocharyan, expressed willingness to give Hakobkokhyan the money. The ex-champ refused the offer, however, saying his true ambition all along had been to raise the money from the Armenian people by pawning his boxing medals.